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ABSTRACT

A research design is described which refines standard classroom observation schedules and techniques in order to reveal the social organization of schooling as the environment for processes of cultural transmission. The author believes a combination of longitudinal and cross-sectional study of classrooms and grade levels is the most effective way of examining the process of transmission. Ethnographic classroom research was carried out in a rural midwestern village over a nine-month period corresponding with the beginning, middle, and end of the school year. Cross-sectionally, every classroom from preschool through 12th grade was systematically observed. Longitudinally, each class was observed all day for at least three days. The research design yeilded testable data and conclusions that are comparable both within and between classrooms and grade levels in the village as well as between school systems. The author argues that high order generalizations about the process of schooling must be based on rigorous observation schedules such as the one described here. His research illustrates the fruitfulness of an ethnographic approach to classroom research. (Author/AV)

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THE LONGITUDINAL AND CROSS-SECTION APPROACH TO A DESCRIPTIVE ETHNOGRAPHY OF SCHOOLING

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Increasingly, both anthropologists and educators are giving significant attention to the ethnographic study of schools and schooling (Burnett 1974;Gearing and Tindall 1973). The relatively few existing ethnographies of public school classrooms are not based on an adequate sampling of constituent units (Johnson 1976a). Both scholarly and popular, the literature on classroom life is rarely based on systematic, representative, empirical descriptions of actual events, activities, and processes (Erickson 1973). Further, the comprehensive sequence of events that is the process of schooling has never been descriptively presented. As a result, much of the communicated data and generalizations on schooling are invariably post hoc.

This note reports an innovative research design for the more effective ethnographic study and presentation of schooling (Johnson 1976b). The methodological problem to be solved is how to ethnographically demarcate, describe, explain, and then communicate the everyday classroom life of a rural, historically biracial school system in the midwestern United States.[1] Here, the purpose is refinement of observation

[1]Research on which this study is based was carried out in Deerfield (psuedonym) from April 1974 to March 1975. The research was supported by National Institute of Mental Health Research Fellowship #MH58496-01. Deerfield has a township population of 2659 persons; 55% of whom are black. There are 350 elementary school and 480 secondary school students.

schedules and techniques so as to more effectively reveal the social organization of schooling as the environment for processes of cultural transmission. If schooling is a process of cultural transmission (Beals and Spindler 1973), how is that process best illustrated and communicated? The following research design not only better conceptualizes and gives form to process but further serves to dramatically illustrate it as such.

Whether of continuity or discontinuity, schooling is most effectively conceived as a process of culture transmission actualized through successive developmental sequences of both recurrent and nonrecurrent events and activities. The classroom is the primary environment mediating the process of schooling as culture transmission (Jackson 1968). The character and organization of public school classrooms and grade levels are quite varied. It is argued that high order generalizations about schooling must not be based on observation samples of only one or two classrooms or of only one or two grade levels. Conceptually and theoretically, delimited observation schedules are of questionable utility.

From day-to-day, what goes on in classrooms? What are the variations as well as the predictable, routine, and generalizable patterns characterizing each classroom and grade level? In consideration of the structure and function of the public school as the mandated enculturative mechanism of states (Cohen 1970) and within the specific context of a biracial community, how are stratification patterns (as based on sex, class, and race) actualized throughout the schooling sequence? In effect, what is the characteristic social organization of schooling? In addressing such encompassing questions, existing observation protocols must be expanded-both in depth and over time. The most effective observational methodology for both apprehending and explaining this process has proven to be the longitudinal and cross-section study of the several developmental units of of schooling (classrooms and grade levels) as they sequentially

occur both in time and in space.

A longitudinal observation methodology defines, describes, and explains variations occuring over time within a single, elementary unit of study (a classroom). Within this universe, the schedule, usually, follows the behavior of a representative segment (several students). Longitudinal observation significantly extends the length and depth of a given study. Increasingly, a longitudinal or microethnographic observation schedule is employed to examine, over time, one or two, usually elementary school, classrooms. Characteristically, classrooms are observed all day for a month or longer (Goetz 1976; Smith 1968). Concurrently, cross-section observation defines, describes, and provides an empirical base for conceptualizing and explaining the intrarelationship, as expressed over space, of single, elementary units (grade levels). Structurally, cross-section methodology demands the comparability of constituent units as well as their representative sampling. As the social structure of public schooling is quite predictable, this methodology takes proper account of antecedent influences on present or future behaviors in establishing a hierarchical, sequential context for each constituent unit. Over space, cross-section observation broadens that which a longitudinal schedule lengthens. The result is a wider, more inclusive and representative empirical base for both conceptualizing and generalizing the social organization of schooling as the environment for culture transmission.

So as to compile an ethnography, it is still quite unique for an anthropologist to spend extended amounts of time in school classrooms (Rist 1975). Entertaining an initial conception of schooling-as-process and as a delimited set of sequences, it is not methodologically logical to observe only one or two constituent units for limited periods of time. A valid observation schedule must reveal, both in time and in space, all of the sequences characteristic of schooling. Employing nonparticipant observation, research was carried out

in Deerfield classrooms over a nine month period corresponding with the beginning, middle, and ending of the school year. So as to apprehend the social organization of schooling, every grade level, from preschool through the twelfth grade, was systematically observed. In the undifferentiated lower grades, every class was observed; two classes, of every level and type, were always observed. Longitudinally, each class was observed all day for at least three days. Within their hierarchical context, Jules Henry's (1960) outline organized the running process notes of particulate events and activities. Though the content of the research specifically focuses on differential black/white sex-role socialization, the broad trends, patterns, and variations in this and other aspects of compulsory schooling are clearly revealed.

Schooling is conceptualized as an inclusive, bounded macroevent; discrete grade levels are constituent events; specific class sessions are major microevents; the irreducable microevent is the classroom behavior stream. An event is a spaciotemporal process manifested, especially, through dyadic interaction (Burnett 1973; Kimball and Pearsall 1955; Smith 1967). Thus, events are analyzed in terms of themselves as well as via more wider, controlled comparisons. This conception of schooling is molecular and dynamic; in not lingering at any one level of atomistic interaction, it is at once comparative and processional. Any school is organized about time and space cycles such as event, activity, hour, session, day, class, grade, and grade level. This research design inductively allows data to itself inform those categories structuring analysis and explanation (Robinson 1951). A description of these on-going cycles illustrates the social organization of schooling.

To allow the effective communication and understanding of the range of behaviors, events, and sequences characteristic, here, of schooling, actual observational data and process data, as well as post hoc generalizations, should be ethno-

graphically presented (Gluckman 1955:1967; Van Velsen 1964). The present research is being written in a format narratively communicating a dramatic sense of and prosaic feeling for what it is like to "go through" American public schooling, preschool through twelfth grade. Schooling-as-process is best illustrated as narrative and dramatic sequence. Such literary concepts and techniques as plot, narrative, drama, and dialogue serve as vehicles for the more effective presentation of qualitative research (Johnson 1976c).

As suggested by bilingual readers, the writing format complements the synthetic observation schedule by presenting, on the same page, first-hand observational, descriptive process narrative and summary, middle-range generalizations. This format allows the point-for-point correlation of primary data and secondary analysis (Glazer 1965). Organized by class and grade level, each set of data is preceded by contextual information and followed by comparative analysis. By including the data on which generalizations are based, a means is provided for the independent falsification of conclusions. Further, the format is not reductionistic; the "situational context" (Van Velsen 1967) of individual behavior is illustrated and preserved. A persistent problem in qualitative analysis has been the presenting of evidence on which generalizations are based without resorting to data reduction (Becker 1958). It was found that this method of data presentation led to greater conceptual clarity and understanding of process by providing an alternate format to reductionistic modes of inquiry and presentation.

This note has suggested a synthetic research methodology generating a more effective ethnographic study of schooling as well as a corresponding descriptive format for the presentation of behavioral data. Descriptive, nonreductionistic ethnographies illustrating the process of schooling are necessary to the continued development of educational anthropology. The systematic study, description, and analysis of

classroom behavior must provide the empirical data base for a cross-cultural, comparative study of schooling. The present research design yielded testable data and conclusions that are comparable both within and between classrooms and grade levels at Deerfield as well as between school systems. This synthetic observation schedule and presentation format illustrates both long and wide range continuities and discontinuities in the process of cultural conditioning. As such, it provides a more rigorous and adequate data base for further generalizations about the process of schooling. Framed in terms of a specific community and more inclusive, national culture, such descriptive ethnographies address themselves to the quite serious problems involving what schooling is, what it is supposed to do, what it actually does, and what it can do.

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